

# Gastrointestinal Illness (GI)

Gastrointestinal illness (GI) is one of the most common causes of outbreaks in LTCFs. There are many causal agents for GI illnesses including: viruses like Hepatitis A and norovirus, bacteria like *E. coli* and *Salmonella* and parasites such as *Giardia* and *Cryptosporidium*.

- **Mode of Transmission:** Person-to-person through the fecal-oral route, but can also be transferred through contaminated food and objects
- **Symptoms:**
  - **Bacteria** – loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain/cramps, blood in stool, fever
  - **Virus** – watery diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, headache, muscle aches
  - **Ova and Parasites** – diarrhea, mucous/blood in stool, nausea or vomiting, severe abdominal pain
- **Duration:** Less than two weeks

**Gastrointestinal Illness:** Any combination of diarrhea ( $\geq 3$  loose stools in 24 hours), vomiting, abdominal pain, with or without fever

**Gastrointestinal Illness Outbreak:** The occurrence of more cases of GI illness in a 24-hour period than would normally be expected based on a facility's individual surveillance data

## Precautions

- Practice proper hand hygiene.
- Clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces.
- Follow the CDC's Standard Precautions guidelines.
- Understand that any patient with foodborne illness may represent the sentinel case of a more widespread outbreak.
- Communicate with patients about ways to prevent food-related diseases.
- Wash fruits and vegetables and cook all food, including seafood thoroughly.
- When you are sick, do not prepare food or care for others who are sick.
- Wash laundry thoroughly.

## Reporting Process

Upon suspicion of a GI outbreak, facilities are required to notify DOH-Collier at (239)252-8226. Once notified, DOH-Collier will provide initial guidance, educational materials and two forms (listed below). These forms should be completed by the facility. With this information, DOH-Collier can provide appropriate recommendations, provide control measures and perform limited laboratory testing.

1. *Outbreak Report Form* which provides all pertinent information
2. *Line List for GI Outbreaks*, a list of all persons with symptoms; the line list should be continuously updated and faxed to DOH-Collier daily to monitor the outbreak.

## Specimen Collection

Specimen collection is an important step allowing for identification of the causal agent so appropriate control measures can take place. For a GI outbreak, specimen collection could include stool samples collected in a sterile specimen cup, SAF vial and/or Carey Blair vial. Laboratory results are given once lab identification is complete.

This can also be done or ordered by the facility or provider. DOH-Collier may provide additional testing (3-5 cases), if appropriate.

### **GASTROINTESTINAL SPECIMEN COLLECTION INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Collect stool specimens for symptomatic residents/staff  
(Use clean container, do not take stool from toilet).
2. Label each specimen container with: Name, Date of Birth, Collection Date.
3. Place specimen containers for each person in a separate biohazard bag.
4. Keep specimens refrigerated (use a “dirty” refrigerator/cooler).
5. Call DOH-Collier to have specimens picked up.

## Outbreak Management and Control Measures

Below are suggested control measures for a gastrointestinal illness outbreak:

- Perform increased disinfection and cleaning of frequently and commonly touched surfaces with a disinfectant that is EPA-registered as effective against norovirus or a diluted bleach and water solution.
- Attempt to minimize the sharing of staff between units of the facility.
- Generate a health alert notice to be posted at all entrances and around the facility to alert visitors, staff, and patients of the outbreak and hand hygiene measures.
- Regularly clean or close water fountains as needed.
- Handle soiled linens carefully, without agitating them, to avoid dispersal of pathogens.
- Discourage/restrict visitation for any non-essential visitors while an outbreak is ongoing.
- Exclude persons that have vomiting or diarrhea from group settings, group activities and/or work until at least 48 hours after symptoms resolve.

## Treatment

Treatments for a GI illness differ depending on the causal agent, and many rely on palliative care. It is important to keep patients hydrated and to utilize medication and antibiotics when necessary. Treatment should be determined/recommended by a resident's medical provider.

## Declaring Outbreak Over

Outbreak control measures can be lifted after two incubation periods of the suspected illness have passed without any new cases occurring in the facility. This is usually 48-96 hours but will be determined based upon specific outbreak characteristics.